

Acts 6:8-15 | And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

## Acts 6:8-15 | Stephen’s Arrest

Martyr is the greek word for witness, but it does not mean witness in our normal use of the term, it means dying for bearing witness. What could make less sense to our contemporary sensibilities than the martyr? Ours is a radically pragmatic culture. What could be less pragmatic than the martyr? I’m using pragmatic technically. That school of thought promoted by John Dewey, early 20th century philosopher at the University of Chicago (not the decimal system guy). Pragmatism is a linguistic concept which asserts that our words and thoughts are best conceived as tools for prediction, problem solving, and action, rather than mirrors of reality.

This was an attempt to bring the Darwinian framework into a philosophical conception of thoughts and language. Thoughts and language are obviously not bearing witness to fundamental truths or uncovering reality, but are tools to address problems. We therefore assess words by their consequences. The language is assessed by the effects of that language. Why would human’s with a divine spark and the image of God be threatened by LLMs who seem to merely use language as a tool for problem solving? Well because we view ourselves and our own language as merely tools for coping with problems. We don’t think we can use language to make fundamental claims to truth. Our question of the LLM’s words and of our own is, did it work?

Well by definition and within a darwinian frame, the Martyr’s words don’t work. They didn’t change the mind of the interlocutor, they drove them to kill. They didn’t preserve the survival of the witness, they led to their death. Likewise, our Pragmatic Darwinian culture requires moralizing the prevention of suffering. Suffering is a clue passed down from our ancestors of those things which lead to non-survival. If words are reducible to their consequences then no testimony is worth dying for. In fact, in our modern paradigm the martyr is the villain. Because the results of the Martyr’s words are to elicit violence. Historian Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy perfectly describes our modern mind. The modern mind “will not get excited or pained over anything because it thinks that to be civilized means to do nothing violent.”

Today we see what elicits the first martyr’s arrest and learn to aspire to his qualities.

# 1. Stephen's Opposition

Acts 6:8 | And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Stephen, who we met last week as one of the first seven deacons, is a hellenistic Jewish Christian. That means he was a greek speaking Jew who became a Christian. Like the apostles he was full of grace and power and was performing great wonders and signs among the people. He became a man of great reputation and made a habit of defending the faith in public. He was a deacon, but his personal ministry was not limited to his role within the church. The whole church is commissioned to defend the truths of the gospel.

Acts 6:9 | Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

Within Jerusalem were two synagogues which were identified together as the Synagogue of the Freedman. These were Jews who were captured into slavery by a Roman army in 63 BC. They subsequently were granted their freedom and found refuge in Jerusalem. The freedman synagogue was thus composed of two groups, one from North Africa and one from Asia Minor. It is these groups in particular which formed together to dispute against Stephen. The important thing to note is that this is a group of Hellenists, like Stephen.

Why does the opposition come from this place so hotly against Stephen? We can only offer conjecture but there is a likely pattern. We have seen the disparity between the hellenists and the hebrews already. It is likely that the Hellenists were often accused by the jews of being more greek than Jewish. Stephen provides a great opportunity to gain solidarity with the Hebrew led Sanhedrin by standing against one of their own for the sake of defending the purity of the temple and the teachings of Moses. It's important to note the dynamic. They do oppose Stephen, but opposing Stephen make them closer to the power structure of the Sanhedrin.

Acts 6:10 | But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Those from the Synagogue of the Freedman were unable to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen was speaking. Notice it always comes down to speaking. Stephen and the other apostles are not charged for the actions of their miracles. They are charged for the news they are proclaiming, to which the signs and wonders bear witness. Stephen's wisdom and Spirit was overcoming his adversaries. His arguments were better. His speech was more clear and direct. The truth which he was proclaiming was more fundamental and irrefutable. Stephen experiences the fruit of Jesus's promise.

Luke 21:15 | For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

This is the promise we have received from our Lord. And Stephen by his faith walked in the fullness of that promise when he was face to face with his adversaries. We ought to do the same. This means as Christians the Lord has promised us we will hold positions and be victorious in those positions. This is what is most antithetical to our present moment. When the one wrong thing to do is hold a position over against another persons position.

But you must notice that this inability to overcome the Christian position by argument or contradiction *is* the promise of danger. The fearfulness of fully expounding our faith is not that we will be found wanting in our arguments. It is that we won't be found wanting in our arguments but that we will be unable to be overcome. And if unable to be overcome that means, like a sword, the word of God will bring division. If this is true, I cannot be with you. That's why the promise of victory in our argument comes with this attendant promise.

Luke 21:16 | You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends,

One way to avoid this second promise is to avoid the first. You can have a Christianity with arguments that never overcome. Or you can experience no division. Stephen will experience the fullness of this promise because he experienced the fullness of the power of the gospel.

## 2. The Delegation of Deacons

Acts 6:11-12 | Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."<sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,

Unable to defeat him within the argument the members of the Synagogue of the Freedman resort to, as you might expect, reputational sabotage. It is important to recognize this strategically because they couldn't slander him after losing an argument to him. He is not vulnerable in their presence he is vulnerable to the people who are absent from him.

They gather together a cohort who is then able to rouse enough support among the people, the elders, and the scribes so that he is ultimately arrested and brought before the council of the Sanhedrin. The accusation is broadly speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God. He is a blasphemer. Same charge that was brought against Socrates. But more importantly for our purposes it is the same charge that was brought against Jesus.

Acts 6:13-14 | and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,<sup>14</sup> for we have

heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”

Just as in Jesus’ trial they bring in false witnesses to testify against Stephen. The claim is that Stephen never ceases to speak against this holy place, the temple, and that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and that he will change the customs delivered by Moses. This is one way to characterize the claims we know Stephen would have been making. But it is an intentionally misleading characterization. We know that Jesus claims to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days were in reference to his body. And his claim to change the customs delivered by Moses are not that the law of Moses would be changed but rather that it would be fulfilled by Christ. It is a precise type of deception.

The attacks against the gospel will always take place where the gospel threatens the most cultural change. You should understand that the gospel necessarily creates a culture war. Here in Jerusalem the attacks against Christ center on the importance of the temple and the Mosaic law. This is the precise place in which the gospel will require the greatest cultural change. The Gospel means that the sacrifices of the temple have been fulfilled and hold no efficacy, and will never be established again, because the good news is the sacrifice that they pointed to has been fully realized in Christ. But this is not good news if your social standing within the Temple structure is the true source of your salvation.

In our culture the places in which the division of the gospel will take place are the very places we would like to feign misunderstanding. Issues of sexuality, Feminism, the promotion of one religion as true in the public square, the exclusivity of the gospel. The argument of the gospel will not be overcome in any of these domains. We know that, the question is will we like Stephen step into the promises of an argument supplied by the Holy Spirit that will not be overcome. Here is the remainder of those promises.

Luke 21:16-19 | and some of you they will put to death. <sup>17</sup> You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. <sup>18</sup> But not a hair of your head will perish.  
<sup>19</sup> By your endurance you will gain your lives.

The Martyr doesn’t make any sense. Its a complete pragmatic failure. Stephen’s words sharpened to the sword which evoked division and violence lead to the cohesion and the enemies of God and his own death. Why witness to that end? Because Stephen was full of faith in the Lord. He understood that he would be killed just as Jesus was killed. But he knew the one who could save him from death. He knew that having been put to death not a single hair of his head would perish. By his endurance he gained his life.

Jesus sharpened his gospel to the point of a sword and he bore the cross because of it, but by the cross we are saved. By the witness of Stephen many are saved.

Acts 6:15 | And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.